



## Newman's Concept of Natural Religion in the *Oxford University Sermons*

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When, then, religion of some sort is said to be *natural*, it is not here meant that any religious system has been actually traced out by unaided Reason. We know of no such system, because we know of no time or country in which human Reason *was* unaided<sup>1</sup>.

The *Oxford University Sermons* is a seminal work produced at the beginning of John Henry Newman's intellectual career. At the heart of this work lies the question of religion, revealed religion and natural religion. Newman realized that they needed to be defended from the unwarranted encroachments of rationalism in its varied forms, specifically under the guise of Liberalism. The above citation succinctly captures Newman's challenge to Liberalism. Throughout the *Oxford University Sermons* he reasserts the sense of mystery in religion. In so doing, he also recovers and enriches the prevailing concept of reason with a more wholesome presentation of what it is and what it entails. I would like to present what Newman understood as natural religion as expressed in this seminal work.

To achieve this goal I shall employ the use of the terms «Notional Religion» and «Real Religion», which will enable me to better present

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<sup>1</sup> *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, Westminster (Md.) 1966, 17 (emphasis in original). (Henceforth abbreviated as *US*.)

Newman's understanding of religion in general, natural religion and its rationalistic impostor<sup>2</sup>.

### A word on Liberalism

John Henry Newman was a man with a keen sense of destiny. He was aware that he had a special calling in life. «I have a work to do in England,<sup>3</sup>» he said while on the verge of death in Sicily as a young Anglican clergyman. He believed that he and his comrades had to come to the rescue of Anglicanism threatened by the onslaught of Liberalism<sup>4</sup>. The supremacy of reason in matters religious was the chief characteristic of Liberalism<sup>5</sup>, which «propagated itself with such wonderful rapidity among the educated classes»<sup>6</sup>. Because of its re-

<sup>2</sup> The use of the terms «notional» and «real» will help to draw out with greater clarity the more specific concepts that Newman has of religion. These qualifiers belong to the early Newman in his thought and works. Cf. I. KERR *John Henry Newman*, 14, 63. See also J.H. WALGRAVE, 'Real' and 'Notional' in *Blondel and Newman*, in «Louvain Studies», 12, n.1 (1987) 8-29; T. MERRIGAN, *Clear Heads and Holy Hearts. The religious and theological thought of John Henry Newman*, Louvain (no date). Merrigan arranges his book around this distinction.

<sup>3</sup> *Apologia pro Vita Sua: Being a History of his Religious Opinions*, New York 1947, 31 (Henceforth AP).

<sup>4</sup> «The members of the little group at Oxford did not content themselves with drawing damaging contrasts or with idly yearning for a return to the living faith of early Christianity. They believed themselves charged with a mission as daring as a primitive apostolate; they must play a dynamic role and breathe life into the dry bones of Anglican belief, and they must do it by making Anglicanism conscious of the history, the psychology, and the dogma which were of its heritage. The lessons might not be welcome; perhaps on that account it was all the more necessary that they should be taught. When all was said, the fabric of the Church of England was based upon the support of the State and, should the hour come when the State deserted her, she could hope to command veneration and escape collapse only if Englishmen were convinced of her apostolic descent, not passively but militantly [...] To awaken the minds of Englishmen, to stir their hearts, to kindle in them such a religious fervor was a work to tax the genius of a very Loyola, but the group of eager Oxonians, who found the task a noble challenge, gave themselves up to it with an enthusiasm which for years smiled at all obstacles». J.J. REILLY, *Newman as a Man of Letters*, New York 1932, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the Liberals and Liberalism one may consult W.E. BUCKLER, *Newman's Apologia as Human Experience*, in «Thought», 39 (1964) 77-88; M.S. BURROWS, *A Historical Reconsideration of Newman and Liberalism. Newman and Mivart on Science and the Church*, in «Scottish Theological Journal», 40 (1987) 399-419; T. NORRIS, *Cardinal Newman and the Liberals: The Strategy and the Struggle*, in «Irish Theological Quarterly», 53 (1987) 1-16; R. PATTISON, *The Great Dissent, John Henry Newman and The Liberal Heresy*, New York 1991; T. STEPHEN, *Newman and Heresy, The Anglican Years*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>6</sup> J.H. NEWMAN, taken from the note to the French translation of his *Apologia* quoted by H. TRISTAM, *The Living Thoughts of Cardinal Newman*, London 1948, 132-133.

ductive understanding of reason and its determination to eliminate mystery, Newman saw in it a deadly threat to man's religious dimension. As an Anglican he confronted its advance. Towards the end of his life, in his acceptance speech to the dignity of Cardinal, he reaffirmed the danger posed by Liberalism and the need to continue to do it battle.

For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of Liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it more than now, when alas! It is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth; and [...] I renew the protest against it which I have made so often<sup>7</sup>.

I will present what Newman understood as natural religion by (1) considering the relationship and differences between natural and revealed religion, (2) followed by a study of natural religion with the Newmanian qualifiers real and notional. This will, I hope, lead to a better appreciation of this basic notion in the intellectual edifice of the Cardinal's work.

### Natural Religion and Revealed Religion

Can it be that those mysterious stirrings of heart, and keen emotions, and strange yearnings after we know not what, and awful impressions from we know not whence, should be wrought in us by what is unsubstantial, and comes and goes, and begins and ends in itself? It is not so; it cannot be. No; they have escaped from some higher sphere; they are the outpourings of eternal harmony in the medium of created sound; they are echoes from our Home; they are the voice of Angels, or the Magnificat of Saints, or the living laws of Divine Governance, or the Divine Attributes; something are they besides themselves, which we cannot compass, which we cannot utter, —though mortal man, and he perhaps not

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<sup>7</sup> J.H. NEWMAN, *Biglietto Speech* quoted in W. WARD, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman*, vol II, London-New York 1912, 459-462.



otherwise distinguished above his fellows, has the gift of eliciting them<sup>8</sup>.

During the nineteenth century, particularly among the Oxford Liberals<sup>9</sup>, natural religion was understood in opposition to Christianity and Judaism. The value of a particular religion depended more on its enlightened characteristics to be judged by reason alone. So true was this proposition that, for the rationalist, the most perfect religion was not the one revealed by God, but the one that agreed with the dictates of reason as understood in the era of the Enlightenment. Some allowed Christianity a privileged place at the table of religions, others wanted the table to be round, whatever the case Christianity must also submit to the unbiased and trustworthy analysis of reason<sup>10</sup>. This self-sufficient and all embracing reason was, in the eyes of Newman, nothing more than a grotesque caricature of the true nature of man's intellect, a direct assault on religion in general and Christianity in particular. Newman's approach to overcoming Liberalism included the fundamental step of redefining the natural religion as at least dependent on the action of the supernatural.

When, then, religion of some sort is said to be *natural*, it is not here meant that any religious system has been actually traced out by unaided Reason. We know of no such system, because we know of no time or country in which human Reason *was* unaided<sup>11</sup>.

Although man's reason is present at the origin of natural religion,

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<sup>8</sup> *US*, 347.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *AP*, 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember that at the time (from 1836 onwards) of the writing of the sermons 2-15 of the *Oxford University Sermons*, Newman was engaged in what he was convinced was a crusade to bring about a «second reformation» to save the Anglican Church from sure destruction brought on by the intrusion of Liberalism. Cf. *AP* 28-31.

<sup>11</sup> *US*, 17 (emphasis in original).



it is not its sole author nor even its primary source. Rather, there is a primitive revelation from God, a supernatural assistance from above to the human race. There are certain strains common to natural and revealed religions<sup>12</sup>, indeed, it is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who revealed himself to primitive man. He did this to anticipate and sustain the wavering conclusions of reason and conscience. Thus primitive revelation does not completely explain the origin of religion as such; nor does it tell us why man is religious at all, for it is merely an auxiliary sent by God to help the testimony of conscience and of reason<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless it does mean that even heathen religions have elements that are not merely the consequence of rational deductions and calculations.

It is interesting, as Achten points out, the similarities between Newman's idea of primitive revelation and that of Wilhelm Schmidt<sup>14</sup>. While Newman limited his concept of primitive revelation to truths on the «nature of God» and the corresponding duties that man owed Him<sup>15</sup>, Schmidt gives primitive revelation a richer and more ample content than Newman. Schmidt thought this revelation most likely included a body of natural truths. These truths were, among others, the following,

God is the almighty Lord and Creator of all things, and consequently of man's singular origin. He is above all change and decay. His is the knowledge of good and evil: changeless and unshakable His holiness. He makes, judges, and avenges the laws of the moral order. A man shall leave father and mother, and take to himself a wife for companion, one essentially like to himself and destined to the same spiritual fellowship. By this marital union God chose to insure the propagation of the race; and through the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *US*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> R. ACHTEN, *First Principles and our Way to Faith. A fundamental-theological study of John Henry Newman's notion of first principles*, Frankfurt am Main, New York 1995, 193-195.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *US*, 18.

first couple the race received from its Maker the duty and right to fill and rule the earth with all thereon<sup>16</sup>.

Schmidt considers these truths to be rooted in human nature, so that man could reach them without any intrinsic necessity for a revelation. He also includes a body of truths that is, strictly speaking, supernatural, thus requiring divine intervention.

But in the very beginning God went beyond the sphere of merely natural truths when He imposed a period of probation, thereby communicating to our first parents, even before their fall, definite supernatural truths<sup>17</sup>.

The major difference between the two is the clear differentiation between natural and supernatural truths. In Newman, unlike Schmidt, it is hard to see whether the truths received through the primitive revelation were more than natural in nature, namely, whether or not they were truths open to man's reason without any supernatural aid. He does not declare himself on this point. A second difference lies in Schmidt's extending the content to include not only the nature of God, and man's relations with God, but also man's social relationships. Newman's position maintains that primitive revelation would only include the nature of God and man's corresponding duties with him. A third difference are the recipients of the primitive revelation. Schmidt sees the «first fathers» of the human race as the original destinataria<sup>18</sup>. Newman, in contrast, seems to prefer Noah as the recipient and transmitter of the primitive revelation that is to be found in primitive religions.

I observe, then, that whether it [primitive revelation] came from

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<sup>16</sup> W. SCHMIDT, *Primitive Revelation*, tr. Joseph Baiert, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis (Mo.) 1939, 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> W. SCHMIDT, *Primitive Revelation*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> *US*, 18.

Noah after the flood or not, so it is, that all religions, the various heathen religions as well as the Mosaic religion, have many things in them which are very much the same. They seem to come from one common origin, and so far have the traces of truth upon them<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, from what has been said it is not possible to exclude Adam and Eve as the original recipients of this primitive revelation. Likewise, Schmidt assigns an essential role to Noah and his family regarding primitive revelation. Although they are not the original receptors of this revelation, they are the guardians of «the precious heritage of the true religion» that was being «smothered by paganism in all forms». Thus both Schmidt and Newman agree that God entrusted the true religion to Noah's family destined «to grow into an entirely new people, whom He confirmed in His knowledge and worship by new revelations»<sup>20</sup>.

Newman obviously makes reference to Genesis 8 and 9 to uphold his theory. Primitive revelation is something that comes from the One True God; it is supernatural in its origin and man did not procure it by himself. It is primitive because it was given to the first fathers of the human race—be that first originally, or first after the cataclysm of the Flood. This would in turn point to the existence of a tradition that passed on the received knowledge from one generation to another.

For the prerogative of Christians consists in the possession, not of exclusive knowledge and spiritual aid, but of gifts high and peculiar; and though the manifestation of the Divine character in the Incarnation is a singular and inestimable benefit, yet its absence is

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<sup>19</sup> *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, San Francisco 1987, v, 1057-1058. (Henceforth *PPS*.) Schmidt clearly states that Adam and Eve are the original depositories of the primitive revelation. «The truths revealed before the fall were comprehended by our first parents with the clarity of an understanding not yet darkened by the storms of passion and concupiscence». W. SCHMIDT, *Primitive Revelation*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> W. SCHMIDT, *Primitive Revelation*, 276.



supplied in a degree, not only in the inspired record of Moses, but even, with more or less strength, as the case may be, *in those various traditions* concerning Divine Providences and Dispensations which are scattered through the heathen mythologies<sup>21</sup>.

Truths handed down from one generation of believers to another were no longer as pure in content as when first received. Eventually, over a period of time deformations crept in that would corrupt the original message<sup>22</sup>. Thus Newman speaks of a heathen religion as «a true religion corrupted»<sup>23</sup>. He does not explain why this deformation takes place. Careful reading shows man's condition after the Fall is the corrupting principle at work in primitive religions<sup>24</sup>.

When Newman confronts natural religion with revelation, he does it from two different yet complementary angles. As mentioned above, he speaks of a primitive revelation, but he also speaks of what might be termed an unknown revelation<sup>25</sup> or a revelation «without credentials»<sup>26</sup>. This is an ongoing support offered by God to man without man actually knowing that it comes from God. He seems to suggest that God revealed some truths that are found in pagan religions through revelations that were never confirmed by divine cre-

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<sup>21</sup> *US*, 33 (emphasis added). See the following references that confirm his position in later works. *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, Westminster (Md.) 1966, 151-152 (henceforth *DMAC*); *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, London 1906, 404 (Henceforth *GA*).

<sup>22</sup> «They are all branches, though they are corruptions and perversions, of that patriarchal religion which came from God. And of course the Jewish religion came entirely and immediately from God. Now God's works are like each other, not different; if, then, the Gospel is from God, and the Jewish religion was from God, and the various heathen religions in their first origin were from God, it is not wonderful, rather it is natural, that they should have in many ways a resemblance one with another». *PPS*, v, 1058.

<sup>23</sup> *PPS*, v, 1058.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *US*, 20, 117, 240.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *US*, 261.

<sup>26</sup> *GA*, 386.

<sup>27</sup> «A revelation might have been really given, yet given without credentials. Our supreme Master might have imparted to us truths which nature cannot teach us, without telling us that He had imparted them, —as is actually the case now as regards heathen countries, into which portions of revealed truth overflow and penetrate, without their populations knowing whence those truths came», *GA*, 386.

dentials<sup>27</sup>. «No people (to speak in general terms) has been denied a revelation from God, though but a portion of the world has enjoyed an authenticated revelation»<sup>28</sup>. A revelation that is not known as such is not properly speaking a revelation. Indeed, «no new revelation has been given... since Christ came»<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, God in some way makes certain religious truths known to man so that he may not totally err in his attempt to follow the stirrings of his nature. In the event of such a revelation (improperly speaking) it is the recipient who will reject or accept it «as his heart sympathized in it, that is, on the influence of reasons which, though practically persuasive, are weak when set forth as the argumentative grounds of conviction»<sup>30</sup>. This action of God has to be understood within the context of the divine plan of bringing all men to Christ. Thus God's insinuations to the non-Christians throughout history is justified by his will to prepare men for Christ.

The difference between Christianity and Judaism on the one hand and heathenism on the other is not the difference between who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. The point is that the «elect people of God» has always had, and the rest of humanity never did have, scripture and the sacraments as divinely appointed channels of communication<sup>31</sup>.

Natural religion can retrace its roots to the dawn of time, to the «first fathers of our race,» who received a revelation of sorts «concerning the nature of God and man's duty to Him.» Contemporary evidence found among the different peoples corroborates this fact. Indeed, «scarcely a people can be named» who do not believe in the powers exterior to the visible world and in their influence upon events<sup>32</sup>. Newman used Scripture as his guide and key to unlock the

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<sup>28</sup> *US*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> *US*, 303.

<sup>30</sup> *US*, 262.

<sup>31</sup> MCGRATH, *John Henry Newman, Universal Revelation*, Macon (Ga) 1997, 72.

<sup>32</sup> *US*, 18.

problem of religion and religions, of the presence of some truths in pagan religions. Humanity was originally granted a primitive revelation on truths to be held and practiced in religion. As man journeyed through history, the integrity of this message was lost. In a state of disorientation and ever increasing darkness, he was still assisted from above in some unknown way, so that some of the truth first revealed might not be totally lost.

Newman looks on all other religions from the perspective of Christianity, it is important to grasp how he understood the relationship between Christian and nonchristian, i.e., natural religions.

There is no simple way of describing this relationship between revealed religion and natural religion. However, by way of complementary considerations it is possible to arrive at an understanding of these relationships. Note that this is a problem only from within the context of Christianity.

The first and most obvious type of relationship that exists between Christianity and natural religion is that of the confrontation of what is true with what is false. Christianity is true and natural religion is false. This is clear throughout Newman's writings. No matter what might be said for primitive revelation and natural religion, they are false. Christianity alone is true<sup>33</sup>. That is why there are texts where he approvingly refers to Scripture that sees «[s]uperstition in its grossest form» as «the worship of evil spirits»<sup>34</sup>. So natural religion is inherently false because it often misses the only proper object of religious worship. It is also false in another way. This is due to its radical incapacity to fulfill the needs of the human heart.

But, it may be asked, was Heathen Religion of no service here? It testified, without supplying the need; it bore testimony to it, by at-

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<sup>33</sup> «Antecedent probabilities may be equally available for what is true, and what pretends to be true, for a Revelation and its counterfeit, for Paganism, or Mahometanism, or Christianity», *US*, 232.

<sup>34</sup> *US*, 240.



tempting to attribute a personal character and a history to the Divinity; but it failed, as degrading His invisible majesty by unworthy, multiplied and inconsistent images, and as shattering the moral scheme of the world into partial and discordant systems, in which appetite and expedience received the sanction due only to virtue. And thus refined philosophy and rude natural feeling each attempted separately to enforce obedience to a religious rule, and each failed on its own side<sup>35</sup>.

Natural religion could stir the human heart, but only enough to awaken a longing for an authenticated revelation of God that it could not satisfy<sup>36</sup>. Only Christianity could satisfy man.

The *University Sermons* highlights another kind of relationship that exists between revealed religion and natural religion based upon an analogy between nature and grace. Newman sees natural religion as natural to man, proper to his nature<sup>37</sup>. As grace does not destroy but perfects nature, so revealed religion does not destroy natural religion but perfects it by cleansing it from inherent corruptions and by fulfilling all the deep rooted desires that of itself it cannot fulfil<sup>38</sup>. What is more, revealed religion goes far beyond the truths that natural religion can reach<sup>39</sup>.

Newman does say that «the Christian graces are far superior in

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<sup>35</sup> *US*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> «No thought is more likely to come across and haunt the mind, and slacken its efforts under Natural Religion, than that after all we may be following a vain shadow, and disquieting ourselves without cause, while we are giving up our hearts to the noblest instincts and aspirations of our nature», *US*, 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *US*, 139.

<sup>38</sup> «The difference, then, between the extraordinary Christian 'spirit,' and human faith and virtue, viewed apart from Christianity, is simply this:—that, while the two are the same in nature, the former is immeasurably higher than the other, more deeply rooted in the mind it inhabits, more consistent, more vigorous, of more intense purity, of more sovereign authority, with greater promise of victory—the choicest elements of our moral nature being collected, fostered, matured into a determinate character by the gracious influences of the Holy Ghost, differing from the virtue of heathens somewhat in the way that the principle of life in a diseased and wasted frame differs from that health, beauty, and strength of body, which is nevertheless subject to disorder and decay», *US*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *US*, 138. Cf. *US*, 181.

rank and dignity to the moral virtues»<sup>40</sup>. Although Christian virtues and moral virtues are, according to Newman, of the same nature, the former nevertheless outstrips the latter in excellence<sup>41</sup>. So heathen religions are like to Christianity, since they are properly speaking «religion,» but Christianity outstrips them in perfection due to its very nature as the definitive revelation of God. The heathen religions are not purely negative realities as they fall within God's plan for mankind. A plan that is realized and fulfilled in Christ alone. This affirmation helps clarify what Newman means when he attributes the term «Dispensation» to natural religions<sup>42</sup>. They have good in them in as far as permitted by God to prepare for conversion to Christ. As such they are interwoven within the context of development of the divine plan<sup>43</sup>.

### **Natural Religion as Real Religion**

Notional can be defined as that which is abstract and distant from everyday experience. It has no room for the heart and it employs the language of formulas and geometry; its expression is in mechanical laws. Real is that which is personal, where the heart plays a fundamental role. Feelings, circumstances and the day to day realities are present and active.

### **Notional Religion**

Notional religion is essentially an abstract product of human reasoning. It is deduced by the activity of logical inference. As such it enjoys little or no spontaneity being concerned with abstract propositions and devoid of contact with reality. It is the religion of the Deists and of Comte, the religion of the rationalists, and the religion of the Liberals within Anglicanism<sup>44</sup>. As the sterile product of the human

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<sup>40</sup> *US*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *US*, 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *US*, 21, 33, 49, 172, 249.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Essays Critical and Historical*, London 1901, vol. ii, 231-234.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *US*, 70.

mind that theorizes and speculates upon its own thought with hardly any data it is not «vital» for men, such that they stake all their «hopes» on it<sup>45</sup>; it is not a living experiential religion.

Notional religion is a theory. Now it is the essential nature of «a theory» that «it cannot cope with difficulties» and as such «it gains no influence over others... shattered and crushed in the stern conflict of good and evil; disowned, or rather overlooked, by the combatants on either side, and vanishing, no one knows how or whither»<sup>46</sup>. The usurpation of reason lies at the heart of the problem of notional religion as it is the heart of Liberalism<sup>47</sup>. Reason that usurps by executing an intellectual procedure without due regard to proper principles of the subject matter causing an invasion of a territory for which reason is neither equipped nor prepared<sup>48</sup>. The resulting mental fabrication is the privilege of those who have the leisure to produce it. On the conclusions of their reasonings they bestow the value of absolute truth. Their theories are beautiful on paper while ignoring the drama of life. So it has neither the power to motivate nor the light to guide the actions of the everyday man<sup>49</sup>. It can only feed the mind but poorly, while shriveling the heart<sup>50</sup>. By so doing, it eventually reduces man's religious desire to a mere search for a coherent system of propositions<sup>51</sup>. The pleasure of impeccable logical reasoning and the satisfac-

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<sup>45</sup> *GA*, 238.

<sup>46</sup> *US*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *US*, Sermon iv The Usurpations of Reason, 54-74.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *US*, 198.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *US*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> «It [notional religion] comes of mere nature, and its teaching is of nature. It uses religious words, of course, else it could not be called a religion; but it does not impress on the imagination, it does not engrave upon the heart, it does not inflict upon the conscience, the supernatural; it does not introduce into the popular mind any great ideas, such as are to be recognised by one and all, as common property, and first principles or dogmas from which to start, to be taken for granted on all hands, and handed down as forms and specimens of eternal truth from age to age. It in no true sense inculcates the Unseen; and by consequence, sights of this world, material tangible objects, become the idols and the ruin of its children, of souls which were made for God and Heaven». *DAMC*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *US*, 266.



tion of giving rational arguments for believing are the goals of the adherents to notional religion.

Nevertheless, Newman's rejection of notional religion must not be construed as irrationalism or fideism, he seeks to defend religion from the abuse of reason's impostor.

Our plain business, in the meantime, is to [...] be careful, while we freely cultivate the Reason in all its noble functions, to keep it in its subordinate place in our nature: while we employ it industriously in the service of Religion, not to imagine that, in this service, we are doing any great thing, or directly advancing its influence over the heart; and, while we promote the education of others in all useful knowledge, to beware of admitting any principle of union, or standard of reward, which may practically disparage the supreme authority of Christian fellowship<sup>52</sup>.

## Real Religion

It is important to note that the term «real religion» is not synonymous with «true religion.» True religion refers exclusively to Christianity<sup>53</sup>, whereas the concept of real religion embraces two types of religions: Revealed religion (which is true) and heathen or natural religion. Real Religion, therefore, includes the multiple historical religions of mankind in its definition. What Newman thought of natural religion as real is what I would like to consider at this moment.

Natural religion is «nature's best offering»<sup>54</sup>, characterized by certain truths common to all pagan religions, which are, to a greater and more perfect way, supremely present in Christianity. As an objective reality it has its own distinctive characteristics. As a whole it is a system, a combination of convictions, of assents, of rites and cults, the

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<sup>52</sup> *US*, 73-74. Cf. *US*, 3; 68-69.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, London 1899, 200. (Henceforth DA)

<sup>54</sup> *US*, 118.

living exercise of a faith in something other than this world<sup>55</sup>. Man's life is guided by principles of action, and real religion is the fundamental axis upon which his world revolves. His actions, his thoughts, his desires are conditioned and shaped by the central and essential role that religion plays in his life. This is so, because religion, when it is real, is vital<sup>56</sup>. Without it religious man finds no purpose nor meaning in his life. He has assented to it with his whole person. He is involved in the deepest possible way in his religion and he is convinced of the truth of what he believes and acts accordingly.

There are different constitutive dimensions in Newman's concept of real religion. This means that natural religions share some common elements that are essential to their identity and their *reality*<sup>57</sup>. It is worth mentioning that they are no longer considered in the dynamics of everyday life but, as it were, from the laboratory<sup>58</sup>. However, these characteristics are immersed in the struggles and the drama of daily life, existentially charged with meaning and purpose, so they are primarily principles of action and not of speculation.

### (1) The Dogmatic Dimension

The first characteristic is that of dogmatism<sup>59</sup>. The dogmatic principle does not refer merely to abstract content in the mind, nor is it concerned with logical deductions as such<sup>60</sup>. The idea of a primitive revelation referred to truths received by one and handed on to another. This knowledge was at once intellectual, abstract, but at the same time, practical. It is the knowledge that guides the intellect of the religious man and his acts.

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<sup>55</sup> «All religions, before the Gospel came, had their mysteries; I mean alleged discourses of Truth, which could not be fully understood all at once, if at all...», *PPS*, v, 1059.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *GA*, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Newman gives a list of «parallel instances in religious doctrine and worship» in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, v, 1058-1060. See also the *Grammar of Assent*, 390-409.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *GA*, 11-12.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *PPS*, v, 1059.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. R. ACHTEN, *First Principles and our Way to Faith*, 194.

Religion cannot but be dogmatic; it ever has been. All religions have doctrines; all have professed to carry with them benefits which could be enjoyed only on condition of believing the word of a supernatural informant, that is, of embracing some doctrines or other<sup>61</sup>.

It belongs to the very nature of religion to answer the deepest questions of man's heart. Religion purports to quench the thirst of the human intellect, or at least to point it definitively in the right direction. To claim that a religion has no unassailable truths is tantamount to saying that it is pointless<sup>62</sup>. Even in the event that a religion opts for silence when asked to expound its mysteries, it does so, not because it is void of content, but out of respect for the mysteries which it holds sacred. Man's weak mind is unable to express them adequately without profanation<sup>63</sup>. Something is always communicated in every religion. Silence communicates transcendence, the totally other dimension of the mystery. Yet for someone to be introduced to that particular religion he must be instructed, he must be taught the tenets of that belief.

All religions must have dogmas if they are to tell men something about the other world<sup>64</sup>, about the afterlife, about judgment, and consequently about the divine<sup>65</sup>. Indeed, by its very essence, religion is a proclamation that all is not as meets the eye in human existence. There are truths that transcend the human mind but are yet essential for man's lasting and complete happiness<sup>66</sup>. Today when we so often hear that all religions are equally true, we must realize, with the help of Newman, that this is an artificial construct of man's reasoning on the

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<sup>61</sup> *DA*, 134.

<sup>62</sup> «No religion, therefore, Newman will never cease to insist, can be of any use, of any reality, if it dispenses with dogma. If religion, the Christian religion above all, implies such a personal relationship between man and God..., how could it survive without some defined knowledge of what God is and what His design concerning us be?», L. BOUYER, *Newman's Vision of Faith*, San Francisco 1986, 48.

<sup>63</sup> *PPS*, v, 1059.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *US*, 196-197.

<sup>65</sup> *US*, 19, 21.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *US*, 116-117.



true nature of religion. Every religion is by nature dogmatic, and if that is true, it is no less true that every religion is by nature exclusive. When a religion embraces all doctrines and dogmas, although contradictory, as equally valid, then in reality, it cannot satisfy the desire of the human mind for meaning and purpose in life. Such a religion has nothing to offer man. Paralysis soon takes over reducing it to a notional religion that will inevitably run aground on the rocks of reality, broken by man's daily struggle and his confrontation with a world that is immersed in suffering<sup>67</sup>.

## (2) The Sacrificial Dimension

The presence of the sacrificial aspect of natural religion reflects its «gloomy nature»; a universal phenomenon present in all places and in all races<sup>68</sup>. When Newman refers to natural religion as «gloomy,» he means that religious man is filled with fear and terror in his relations with the divine. Fear and terror are not irrational passions but rather arise from the awareness of the individuals own sinfulness<sup>69</sup> before the Transcendent<sup>70</sup> in whose light, as dust in the light of the sun, man discovers his own defilement through his sins<sup>71</sup>. This fear and terror is heightened by man's awareness that there will be a future judgment at the end of his life in which he will be held accountable for all he has done<sup>72</sup>. It is an essential characteristic of real religion. Thus there are natural religions that are no longer gloomy (according to Newman the Greek Mythology was one such religion, «cheerful and graceful»), a sure sign that they are refinements and decadent forms of natural religion where natural religiosity has almost disappeared<sup>73</sup>, having become notional.

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *US*, 297.

<sup>68</sup> *US*, 116.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *US*, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *US*, 118.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *DAMC*, 87.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *US*, 19; *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions*, Westminster (Md) 1968, 67.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *GA*, 395-396.

I myself cannot doubt, seeing what I see of the world, that it [the lack of gloom in the religion of the day] arises from the sleep of Jonah; and it is therefore but a dream of a religion, far inferior in worth to the well-grounded alarm of the superstitious, who are awakened and see their danger, though they do not attain so far in faith as to embrace the remedy of it<sup>74</sup>.

Newman's ideas concerning human nature come to the fore in his reflection upon sacrifice and religion. He also offers particularly valuable insights into the nature and origin of religion underscoring the importance of religion in the life of the individual. His concept of man, of the «unregenerate» man is based upon Scripture. He sees man as, primarily, a positive creation of God. Still, man has fallen, and his nature was wounded bending him toward a fundamental distortion as it lead him away from his ultimate purpose in life<sup>75</sup>. The real man is not the carefree imaginary figure living in the peace and quiet of the heyday of the British Empire<sup>76</sup>. The real man is the one who confronts moral suffering, pain and guilt in his own life and dramatically discovers that he is a sinner. Herein lies the fundamental notion that explains the purpose of sacrifices<sup>77</sup>.

Now man naturally tends to reject that sensation of sin and of unworthiness experienced because of the irresponsible use of his freedom. And yet, paradoxically, it is from within himself, that he is unceasingly confronted with the heavy burden of responsibility for his actions. Throughout history sacrifice is a response that seeks to propitiate «the unseen powers of heaven» to ward off the future punishment

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<sup>74</sup> *PPS*, i, 203. By «the superstitious» Newman refers to the heathens who really practice their religion; although it is «gloomy,» at least it reflects their own reality of sinners.

<sup>75</sup> «But the Christian acknowledges that he has fallen away from that rank in creation which he originally held; that he has passed a line, and is in consequence not merely imperfect, but weighed down with positive, actual evil», *US*, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Newman considers this fact in the context of Victorian England, many refusing to accept that men can do evil because they live in a time of peace and calm. This period of peace can deceive men so that they see human nature as essentially good, as perfect, with no moral difficulties. Cf. *US*, 102-104, 114-116.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *US*, 117.

for sin in this life. In this way Newman interprets the universality of the phenomenon of sacrifice through the prism of appeasement<sup>78</sup>. The most extraordinary acts of self-denial and self-punishment characterize man's efforts to set things aright.

Some have gone so far as to offer their sons and their daughters as a ransom for their own sin, —an abominable crime doubtless, and a sacrifice to devils, yet clearly witnessing man's instinctive judgment upon his own guilt, and his foreboding of punishment<sup>79</sup>.

Thus the sacrificial dimension of real religion reveals man's original awareness of his radical openness and dependence on the Transcendent. It is an awareness that accompanies him in everything he does. He realizes that he has not the final word in his own destiny. Thus, the religious man experiences himself as naturally under obedience to the divine<sup>80</sup>. This experience is antecedent to religions because it arises from the conscience. Yet it is through religion that man pretends to answer the One who summons him in his conscience. He experiences this call to obedience and to repentance as beyond his power to control. He cannot flee from it any more than he can flee from his own nature.

Sacrifice is a fundamental category that makes manifest an attitude of commitment involving the whole person. In the act of self-giving this assent is ratified<sup>81</sup>. Sacrifice presents a religious man aware of his task to make a fundamental decision, a radical decision, to obey. It is the forum where a man reveals most clearly his own dependence on the Transcendent.

[B]ut when men are conscious of sin, are sorrowful, are weighed down, are desponding, they ask for something external to them-

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. *US*, 116.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *US*, 48-49. See also *US*, 117 where Newman describes what man «gloomily» thinks of «disobedience».

<sup>81</sup> *US*, 116.



selves. It will not do to tell them that whatever they at present hold to as true, is enough. They want to be assured that what seems to them true, is true; they want something to lean on, holier, diviner, more stable than their own minds. They have an instinctive feeling that there is an external, eternal truth which is their only stay<sup>82</sup>.

The positive side of sacrifice lies in the radical uncompromising witness it bears to human freedom. A man would not perform sacrifices unless he were at least partially responsible for what he was doing. Nor is it a detached responsibility, but an intense subjective awareness that every man experiences of being the master of his acts.

That we are accountable for what we do and what we are, – that, in spite of all aids or hindrances from without, each soul is the cause of its own happiness or misery, – is a truth certified to us both by Nature and Revelation. Nature conveys it to us in the feeling of guilt and remorse, which implies self-condemnation<sup>83</sup>.

Freedom as manifested by sacrifice is intimately connected with the notion of justice. Freedom is acceptable, and therefore right and good, if and only if it corresponds with the norms issued by the divine. It is the norm that conditions the freedom of man. Free choice exercised outside the norm becomes sin, a transgression and offense against the Supreme Power. If a man thought that the misuse of his freedom was of little or no importance, he would not take upon himself such terrible sacrifices to try and set things right. The religious man knows himself to be one summoned to a mode of acting. If he wishes to be happy, he must follow the law that is laid out for him. Real religion demands an unconditional and absolute self-giving. It thereby reveals the transcendental orientation imbedded in its very dynamism. Sacrifice is meaningful only if it is considered within the context of the totality of the summons of the duties that man knows he

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<sup>82</sup> *DA*, 133.

<sup>83</sup> *US*, 137.

has before the Deity. This summons must come from a superior power to which obedience is due if it is to carry any weight. In short, from what has been said, a man's happiness must depend on obedience to the summons of duty to the Deity that he believes in, if the fact of sacrifice is to have any meaningful explanation.

### (3) The Transcendental Dimension

The reflection on the sacrificial dimension of religion logically leads to a consideration of what I have termed the transcendental dimension of religion. As Newman has said, only a superior power can claim the habitual obedience that entails sacrifice in fulfilment of the divinely mandated duty, or sacrifice in propitiation due to infidelity. Newman defines religion as «the system of relations existing between us and a Supreme Power, claiming our habitual obedience»<sup>84</sup>.

Newman interrelates fidelity, obedience and sacrifice in his understanding of natural religion. These three elements are present in real religion playing a prominent role in a man's religious life. However, they are of themselves meaningless unless consciously and intentionally perceived as founded upon and related to the Transcendent. The very foundation of all religion lies in its capacity to place the religious subject in relation with the Supreme Power. If this were not so, then a religion could not lay claim to a man's allegiance and would possess no influence over his heart<sup>85</sup>.

Given his sacramental-economy vision of the world, it is understandable that, if it is true that all religions in some way have some truth in them due to primitive revelation and the intimations of conscience, then it is no less true that the idea of sin would also, in some way, be included in the primitive revelation or in conscience. This is so, because, sin is a rebellion against the One True God. The need to sacrifice comes from the experience of conscience that states quite im-

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<sup>84</sup> *US*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. L. BOUYER, *Newman's Vision of Faith*, 48.

periously that things are not as they should be. The religious man experiences conscience, then, as the messenger of the Supreme Power. This subjective experience dynamically suggests belief in an external principle superior to the human mind that draws man to itself<sup>86</sup>. This principle is by its very nature beyond man, for man cannot absolutely control and determine his conscience. He experiences his finitude in the presence of his conscience, for he cannot write the law, «do good and avoid evil,» but must suffer the consequences of that law written in his own heart. Thus, conscience is the «essential principle and sanction of Religion»<sup>87</sup>.

Consequently, for Newman, transcendence plays a fundamental role in religion. Where there is sacrifice, there is an intimation of God, a reflection of an awareness of the Supreme Reality<sup>88</sup>. A religion will try to convey, who or what that Transcendent is, by means of its own creed. A natural religion, though it proclaims to know certain things about the Deity, will promote the reality of mystery. The dogmatic dimension does not destroy the transcendent dimension of religion; rather, it reaffirms it.

Thus a correct thinker might be sure, that if God is infinite and man finite, there must be mysteries in religion. It is not that he really feels the mysteriousness of religion, but he infers it; he is led to it as a matter of necessity, and from mere clearness of mind and love of consistency, he maintains it<sup>89</sup>.

The transcendental orientation of natural religion as seen in the dogmatic and sacrificial dimensions confirms the fact that natural religion is real, and what is more important, it is essentially oriented to a sphere, a reality that goes beyond the range of syllogistic reasoning. If this is true, then the origin of natural religion will have to be found beyond the realm of mere human reflections.

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<sup>86</sup> *US*, 20, 21.

<sup>87</sup> *US*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. *US*, 249; *DAMC*, 246.

<sup>89</sup> *DAMC*, 175.



#### (4) The Social or Interpersonal Dimension

It is necessary to reflect upon the social dimension of real religion, that is, the growth of religion within a society. If a religion does not grow, it is dying—and eventually, if no change is forthcoming, it will disappear. Natural religion is propagated by education and by proselytism. In education it is the family and the society that prepare the child to initially believe or reject the standard religious faith of his peers. It is in proselytism where the interpersonal dimension of religion is more emphatically experienced. A man will be carried along to a new religion or to a deeper experience of his religion thanks to the witness of another. He will be convinced by the coherency of life that another lives, by his sincerity and his virtue<sup>90</sup>.

The religious enthusiast bows the hearts of men to a voluntary obedience, who has the keenness to see, and the boldness to appeal to, principles and feelings deep buried within them, which they know not themselves, which he himself but by glimpses and at times realizes, and which he pursues from the intensity, not the steadiness of his view of them<sup>91</sup>.

Personal influence exercised by the testimony of the coherent man is worth more than words. The more the members of a certain religion cease to be authentic witnesses to their faith, the fewer people will be interested in it. Religious doctrines are always mediated by the lives of others. Inauthentic living produces hypocrisy; this in turn produces a sensation of indifference, which of itself will culminate in doubt and in practical disbelief<sup>92</sup>.

John Henry Newman was born in 1801 into an age of great thinkers, statesmen, and scientists<sup>93</sup>. As «one who shaped the spirit of

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<sup>93</sup> M. WARD, *Young Mr. Newman*, New York 1948, Introduction vii.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. *US*, 165-166.

<sup>91</sup> *US*, 220.

<sup>90</sup> *US*, 92.

his age as much as he was shaped by it<sup>94</sup>» he took his place alongside the leading figures of the nineteenth century. Newman engaged the problems of his time with a distinct sense of mission. A keen sense of God's presence and his calling him to serve the truth deeply marked his personality and guided his life's work<sup>95</sup>. His experience had taught him to see that «his whole life as a person depended more on his dealings with the God, who is present to him as the *transcendent Person*, than on his associations with anybody or anything belonging to this world<sup>96</sup>.» So he was prepared to look at religions in general and in the lives of individuals with an open mind. In his studies he discovered the «real» quality of natural religions, the essential characteristic that distinguished them from the impostors of Liberalism. At the heart of every real natural religion he saw the mystery of the human person in search of the mystery of the Transcendent Being.

**Summary:** *Il presente studio prende in esame la concezione della religione naturale del Card. John Henry Newman a partire dall'analisi degli Oxford University Sermons. Newman fu impegnato nella corretta comprensione della religione pagana come primo passo per evidenziare gli errori del liberalismo. Nell'articolo si cerca di mostrare gli aspetti che distinguono la concezione liberale di religione da quella di Newman sulla base dell'applicazione dei concetti newmaniani di «nozionale» e «reale».*

**Parole chiave:** Filosofia della religione, religione rivelata, religione naturale, liberalismo, John Henry Newman.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of Religion, Revealed Religion, Natural Religion, Liberalism, John Henry Newman.

<sup>94</sup> A.J. BOEKRAAD, *The Personal Conquest of Truth According to J.H. Newman*, Louvain 1995, 68.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. H.R. KLOCKER, *Newman and Causality*, in «Heythrop Journal», 6 (1965), 160; J.M. HAAS, *La ragione al suo posto*, 105-106.

<sup>96</sup> E. SILLEM, *Cardinal Newman as a Philosopher, Notes on Recent Work*, in «Clergy Review», 48 (1963), 184 (emphasis in original).